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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/RUS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV RS

SUBJECT: INDEPENDENT CAMPAIGN PREVAILS OVER UNITED RUSSIA MACHINE IN NIZHNY TAGIL

REF: YEKATERINBURG 62

¶1. (SBU) The October 12 Municipal elections in Nizhny Tagil resulted in a rare defeat in United Russia's (UR) scorebook, but one which party publicists have sought to characterize as a victory. The campaign demonstrated that UR's overwhelming "administrative" resources do not always guarantee victory over a popular candidate running a strong campaign. Valentina Isayeva, a UR member who campaigned as an independent when she didn't receive the support of the party leadership, polled 37% of the vote to defeat the official UR-backed candidate Aleksey Chekanov, who finished a distant third.

¶2. (SBU) On October 23, local internet news sites reported rumors that the fiasco in Nizhny Tagil may cost Aleksandr Levin his job as head of UR's Sverdlovsk Oblast organization, but our party contacts will not confirm this. Levin is Sverdlovsk Oblast Governor Eduard Rossel's closest political confidant. Levin's fate may not become clear until after UR council meetings on the federal level next week. The result of those deliberations may indicate the extent to which maneuvering in anticipation of the expiration of Rossel's term in office next fall has already begun.

¶3. (SBU) In dissecting this contentious intraparty squabble, local independent political analysts faulted United Russia for choosing a weak candidate and running a poorly organized, low-budget campaign. According to our contacts, Chekanov, a local businessman, appeared unmotivated and allowed regional party authorities to dominate his campaign. Isayeva, on the other hand, started from a strong position as deputy chairman of the city duma. She ran a vigorous grassroots campaign, a tactic that was necessitated by her virtual exclusion from local TV coverage, according to press reports quoting her campaign manager. Though Isayeva was initially threatened with expulsion from the party when she declared her candidacy, she ultimately retained her UR membership. This has enabled UR to assert that the elections represent an overall victory for UR because the top three vote-getters were all UR members.

¶4. (SBU) One local insider acknowledged that Chekanov may not have been the best candidate, but party leaders believed they could dissuade Isayeva and others from running. In addition, according to this operative, UR strategists underestimated the appeal of a female candidate. Other analysts believe that the example of Nizhny Tagil could stimulate competition both within and outside the party. The turmoil within the local UR organization may lead to recognition of the value of more open intraparty competition in selecting candidates. Meanwhile, non-UR candidates may see the result in Nizhny Tagil as an example of how a determined challenger can defeat a vulnerable UR candidate.

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